

Pakistani regime ban of YouTube highlights threat to free Internet

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On February 22, the Pakistani Telecommunications Authority (PTA) ordered the country's Internet service providers (ISPs) to block access to YouTube, the world's most popular video web site. Access was completely restored in Pakistan only after four days, amid popular opposition and allegations of electoral fraud.

The case captured media attention because the ban on YouTube spread far beyond Pakistan, blocking most of the world's population from accessing YouTube for a period of two hours.

According to a statement released by YouTube on February 25, "For about two hours, traffic to YouTube was routed according to erroneous Internet Protocols, and many users around the world could not access our site. We have determined that the source of these events was a network in Pakistan. We are investigating and working with others in the Internet community to prevent this from happening again."

Internet protocols (IPs) are the conventions or standards used to communicate data across the web. In blocking YouTube, Pakistani ISPs had been sending out false Internet protocols with respect to the site, thereby diverting related traffic to a virtual cul-de-sac.

The BBC reported that a false IP address used in Pakistan to block the site was leaked outside of national borders through ISP Pakistan Telecom, which had propagated it to one of its partners, Asian telecom giant PCCW. PCCW in turn broadcast it to ISPs across the globe, ostensibly unaware that it was false until contacted by YouTube engineers.

As one Internet engineer explained the situation to the BBC, "It is exactly like the 'game of telephone' that kids play. For example, Pakistan Telecom says 'I am responsible for 1.2.3.4 (some IP address)' and then they tell PCCW. PCCW tells Verizon Business and NTT and others. NTT tells us and so when my customers ask 'Where is YouTube, we're just answering based on what we've heard....' But all we know is that we heard it from NTT who heard it from PCCW who heard it from Pakistan Telecom. If Pakistan Telecom was lying (or made a mistake), we'd have no way to verify it."

The official rationale for the initial restriction on YouTube within Pakistan was that the Internet site was being used to propagate anti-Islamic material considered blasphemous by political and religious leaders. The ban was initially limited to a single uploaded video, the trailer for a deliberately provocative film about the Koran by right-wing Dutch politician Geert Wilders. Wilders is seeking to have the Koran banned as contrary to Dutch law.

After blocking the Wilders video URL, the Pakistani government abruptly extended the ban to the entire site. "They asked us to ban it immediately...and the order says the ban will continue until further notice," Wahaj-us-Siraj, convener of the Association of Pakistan Internet Service Providers, told the Reuters news agency on February 25. "Users are quite upset. They're screaming at ISPs which can't do anything."

There are indications, however, that the real reason for the block on YouTube may have had little to do with the Wilders video. The Pakistani daily *The News* pointed out that the Wilders promotional video had been on YouTube for more than a month, in addition to being available elsewhere online.

A number of Pakistani bloggers have asserted that the more likely reason for the ban was the emergence February 21 on YouTube of secretly filmed videos documenting what appears to be vote-rigging activity in the recent elections in the country. One such video claims to show footage of party activists from the pro-Musharraf MQM stamping ballot papers en masse in the NA-250 constituency of Karachi.

Whatever the rationale for the blockage, the move highlights the growing threat to free Internet access in countries throughout the world. Like all unpopular national governments, Musharraf's regime has long viewed the Internet as a potential threat to its rule.

Pakistan remains widely unconnected via the technology, with Internet penetration of just over 7 percent of the total population, according to telecommunications tracker InternetWorldStats.com. Nevertheless, out of a country of 160 million, this proportion represents a sizeable number of the Pakistani workers, students, and intellectuals with access to uncontrolled, uncensored, and potentially damning information.

The YouTube ban is not the first instance in which the regime has attempted to quash free speech and independent channels of information. In March 2006, a Supreme Court action supposedly aimed against blasphemous material on the net resulted in blocking access to Google's popular weblog hosting service, Blogger.com. This move was also seen by many as an attempt to muzzle criticism of the Musharraf regime.

The arbitrary way in which the YouTube ban was enforced offers one more reflection of the extent of control the regime exercises over the state apparatus and social infrastructure. The PTA, which enforced the ban, has close ties to the regime via the numerous military officials who were installed in the agency after Musharraf came to power in 1999. Typical of this arrangement is

PTA head Shahzada Alam Malik, who is a retired Major General.

The Musharraf regime's attempt to keep a grip on Internet speech freedoms is only one facet of a general policy of censorship. With 80 percent of the population relying on television transmissions for news, private television networks are also closely monitored and managed by the state.

Shortly after Musharraf lifted the ban on media ownership in 2000, privately owned networks proliferated. Networks GEO TV and ARY quickly became extremely popular, at the expense of the state-run PTV. In order to bring the private stations under state control, the regime established the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) in 2002.

In 2007, PEMRA was given extra powers to suspend the licenses of broadcasters deemed offensive to the regime, and on this pretext, GEO TV and ARY were taken off the air later that year for running reports critical to Musharraf's Emergency Rule.

Individual news reporters have also been the subject of state repression and intimidation. According to Human Rights Watch, following the December 27 assassination of presidential candidate Benazir Bhutto, many journalists have faced terrorism charges.

In the face of election fraud allegations leveled by both senior Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and PML-N (Nawaz) leaders, the hasty attempt to clamp down on Internet access points to the desperate lengths that Musharraf and his backers are willing to go to cling to power.

Referring to the delay by the election commission in releasing the ballot results in February, senior PPP member Taj Haider commented that the regime was "trying to rig the results by holding the final results of several seats," and "maximize seats of their loyalists although they have lost the elections." Haider singled out Karachi as an example of this, where he claimed that the results of five seats were changed in favor of the MQM.

"The MQM has snatched victory by using force, stuffing ballot boxes in connivance with the police," said Rafiq Baloch, a defeated PPP candidate in Karachi. Saleem Zia, the leader of PML-N in Sindh province, of which Karachi is the capital, said his party was seven seats ahead before "the result was changed overnight."

International observers monitoring the elections noted that the process was skewed in favor of the MQM against the PPP. Nevertheless, the PPP garnered a third of the vote, with the PML-N capturing another quarter. The two entered into a national coalition government agreement February 21, though Musharraf remains president.

This is not the first time that YouTube has been the subject of censorship. In March of last year, Turkish courts banned access to the site citing content that was insulting to Kemal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey. In May, the site was blocked in Morocco in relation to videos critical of the government policy in Western Sahara. It was also banned for five months in Thailand last year, over videos that were seen as insulting the Thai King.

A recent report by the Open Net Initiative, a group dedicated to identifying and documenting Internet censorship around the world, identified 25 countries that routinely apply state-mandated web filtering.

Among the most notorious offenders is the government in China, which routinely controls Internet traffic and attempts to filter out

political opposition. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, 25 reporters and editors in China are currently imprisoned for their work, more than half of them for Internet-related activities.

Another such country is India, the particularly aggressive censorship of which is sharply at odds with its efforts to appear as a progressive democracy. Among other legal and legislative maneuvers aimed at curtailing speech freedoms, the Indian government has established a so-called "Computer Emergency Response Team" for the purpose of monitoring all incoming and outgoing traffic from the country.

The Sri Lankan government blocked a website sympathetic to the separatist group the Tamil Tigers in July of last year. In December, the Australian Communications and Media Authority announced that it would begin a campaign of censorship against websites deemed by government intelligence agencies to contain "inappropriate material."

The United States government has attempted to rein in Internet activity in a multitude of ways. The Defense Department, which has implemented sharp restrictions on Internet use by active duty rank-and-file military personnel, calling independent information about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan a "significant vulnerability." The Bush administration has implemented large-scale surveillance online, including collecting e-mail activity of millions of people. In a general sense, monopolization and attempts to tier web traffic—giving priority to corporations and military activity—have the consequence of curtailing independent development and information flows.

The attacks on free speech on the Internet—as in virtually every other sphere of social life—indicate that ruling national bourgeoisies are increasingly conscious of the possibilities of popular revolt.

Under conditions of unprecedented levels of inequality and exploitation and growing unrest, various ruling elites rightly see the Internet as a potential vehicle for mobilizing mass opposition against existing social relations. As a media form, the Internet is of particular concern because it operates outside the control of the traditional mass media formats, which are themselves often under the control of major corporations or national governments.

Ultimately, the development of the Internet as an international, democratic, mass form of information is incompatible with the existing superstructure of competing nation states and privately owned ISPs and telecom companies. It is only within a framework of rational economic planning on a global scale that humanity can utilize such technology to its fullest potential.



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